A LINGUISTIC DESCRIPTION OF CHAKMA LANGUAGE

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INTRODUCTION

It is generally accepted that the history of the evolution of a language is intimately associated with the story of its speakers. This is particularly true of languages spoken by closely knit ethnic groups residing in remote areas of the world. Since these languages often do not get much official patronage as a medium of education or conducting official business the exposure of such groups to more dominating socio-linguistic environments creates many problems. In some cases the communicative needs enforce massive amounts of adaptations and assimilations which change the very character of the language. In some other cases the native speakers after a few generations forget their own tongue and adopt a pidgin as a medium of communication for survival. These changes become rampant when forced migrations or traumatic changes happen in their lives. Either these factors influence the language and make the task of classification and codification difficult.

The case of Chakma language is a classical one where migration from eastern India to Arakans and subsequent movements to Chittagong Hill Tracts has brought in so many changes that today it is difficult to trace its origins. Linguists since the middle of the last century have given a variety of theories regarding its origin and almost all of them have been questioned in one form or the other. Their demographic distribution distribution in three countries namely Bangladesh, Myanmar and India end within India in four north-eastern States namely Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Mizoram and Tripura has created a situation where Chakmas in one administrative unit have little contact with each other. Naturally this has affected the adoption of an uniform
Orthographic system and recognition and codification of the standard form of the language. Issues of survival naturally take precedence over codification of the language, but this makes the task more difficult.

THEORIES REGARDING ITS ORIGIN

Grierson (1904) classified the language as a sub dialect of Bengali and Chatterjee reiterated this view in 1967. Both of them were quite obviously guided by the presence of a large number of words from the Bengali spoken in and around the Chittagong Hill Tracts. Similarities in the phonological structure and the syntactic structure were perhaps other factors which guided them to their conclusion. Native speakers like Chakma (1992) and Talukdar (1994) have pointed out features like the presence of a number of Arakanese words, the script which resembles the ancient Pali script and the differences in the morphemic features to question this view. It is a fact that lexical items from Tibeto-Burman and Sino-Tibetan language are present and there are remarkable differences between the morphemic and syntactic structures of Bengali and Chakma. Indeed it is difficult to accept or reject any of the theories in toto. A look into the history of the people explains many of the problems associated with the language.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

There are no recorded histories of the Chakmas and most of the reconstruction of the history is done on the basis of examination of oral traditions and folklore. Most scholars believe that the Chakmas are connected with the Sakya dynasty (the dynasty of Buddha) and that they originally belong to Kapil Nagar an ancient kingdom in the northern Bihar or south-eastern Nepal. It was perhaps the missionary zeal to spread Buddhism that encouraged Dhaja Raja, a Sakya prince, to migrate to the Arakans with some followers in the 5th century before Christ and establish a kingdom there (Gogoi 1976:104). Talukdar believes that the kingdom was set up at Champak Nagar in northern Burma and its inhabitants came to be known as Chakmas (1994:9). Pemberton (1994) believes that the Chakmas are a mixture of the Shakyas of Kapilavastu and the Thek tribe of Burma. There are some scholars who believe that the Chakmas are mixture of Theka and the descendants of Shah Shuja and Mughal Prince of the seventeenth century (Rizvi 1976:65 and Karim 1983).
One may never be able to reconstruct the past precisely. However, what is certain is that the Chakmas have a long history of migration to escape persecution and subsequent assimilation with the local environment to create a new identity for themselves. The Sakya line perhaps explains their Buddhist faith, their Pali script and their Thek influence their mongoloid looks and the Arakanese lexicon.

The migrations from Burma began again the 10th century AD as unsettled conditions prevailed in Arakans. In fits and starts they began moving out to Chittagong Hill Tracts and established themselves in Chittagong. This slow but steady process of migration continued for about six centuries. Harvey believes continous persecution and barbarism was one of the major factors leading to migrations (1967:137-216).

1769 marks a water-shed in the history of the Chakmas. In this year Chittagong Hill Tracts was annexed into the British Empire and the seat of Chakma power shifted from Chittagong to Rangamati. It also exposed the Chakmas to formal education and their exposure to the Bengali language also began from this period. As the medium of instruction was Bengali the Chakmas were forced to learn Bengali. This was to have profound impact on the Chakma language.

On one hand long years of survival in Arakans had naturally influenced their language and many semantic and lexical items had automatically crept in. However, from the late eighteenth century they found that Bengali was a language of opportunities for them. For a small ethnic community which had constantly moved around in search of security and stability the contact with Bengali was a God sent opportunity. The comparatively safe environment and the opportunities available through a knowledge of Bengali saw large-scale adoption of the language and the assimilation of Bengali words in the Chakma language. The massive adoption perhaps explains the close proximity between the two and the background to view that Chakma is a dialect of Bengali.
PHONOLOGICAL FEATURES

The phonetic features of the language and very similar to that of Hindi and Bengali. All the consonants in Hindi are present in Chakma language. A list of the consonants has been added in the Appendix. It is interesting to note Bengali does not distinguish |b| and |d| and both are articulated as |b|, however, Chakma like Hindi does distinguish between the two and these two sounds and these form minimal pairs for constraints in meanings. Peculiarly, enough typical sounds like the breathed |m|, |n| or sounds like |t| so common in the Sino-Tibetan languages like Lushai, Kuki or Burmese are absent in Chakma language. In fact when one studies the consonant chart of Chakma one cannot but be surprised by the similarities with the Indo-Aryan languages.

The native speakers of the language often do not distinguish between |ʃ| and |ʃ| though they are separate phonemes. There is also a lot of interchangibility between |t| and |ʃ|. So much so that |ʃ| is often pronounced as |t|. There is also a natural tendency to transform alveolar plosive |t| to a more soft dental fricative |t|, though both these phonemes do not form minimal pairs and there are separate orthographic symbols to distinguish the two. These are perhaps examples of the influence of Assamese and Bengali exerting their influence on the spoken form of Chakma.

The vowel inherent in the Chakma consonant is |a| and not |A| as happens in Bengali, Hindi or Assamese. This indeed is something unique to the Chakma system of consonants. The orthographic symbol for the consonants includes the vowel |a| and a special mark has to be put over the consonant symbol to show that it is before of the vowel. For example, if \( x \) is the symbol for the consonant |K|, it would be read as |K\( a \)| and \( x \) or the consonant with marker on top would be read as |K|.

The Vowel system of the language is similar to that of Bengali and Hindi. As far as Cardinal vowels are concerned there are no differences. A list of the vowels and diphthongs is given in Appendix II. The orthographic system like that of Hindi and Bengali uses special markers to indicate vowels occurring after the consonants. The use
of diphthongs is rather limited in Chakma, though diphthongs like \(|\ddot{a}\nu|\), \(|\ddot{a}\dot{a}|\), \(|\ddot{a}\nu|\) and \(|\ddot{a}\nu|\) do exist and each of these has a single orthographic symbol like in the Indo-Aryan languages. Vowel clusters which are so common in the languages of north-eastern India are quite limited in use. One could perhaps conclude that most of the words where vowel clusters occur have come about as a result of close contact with Arakanese or Burmese.

The language generally does not use consonant clusters and normally the syllable structure is CVCV. Most of the consonant clusters are found in borrowed words. For example the very word Chakma has a consonant cluster \(|\ddot{a}k\nu|\). It must however be noted that the original word was \(|\ddot{e}\ddot{a}m\nu|\) which had two syllables \(|\ddot{e}l\nu|\) and \(|m\nu|\) and the word \(|\ddot{e}m\nu|\) is an Anglicized version of the same word.

Examples of vowels occurring in the initial position of the word are comparatively few. Most of the words beginning with vowels commence with \(|\ddot{a}|\) like \(|\ddot{a}:\ddot{e}\nu|\) (maternal grandfather) or \(|\ddot{a}:\ddot{a}\nu|\) (high). Use of other vowels in the initial position of words is mostly limited to borrowed or assimilated words like English. Similarly consonants at the initial position of a word must necessarily have a vowel symbol or marker attached to them. At the initial position of the word consonants like \(|\ddot{b}|\) or \(|\ddot{g}|\) are not possible. They must necessarily be either \(|\ddot{b}o|\), \(|\ddot{g}o|\) or something like that. To make the consonant without any vowel suffix the symbol ')-' is used over the symbol denoting the consonant. However, this is possible only at the final position of the word and not medially or at the initial position of the word.

Nasalization of consonants and vowels occur often at the medial and final position of the word. Nasalization when used after a verb changes its aspect. For example the suffix \(|\ddot{e}j|\) with the root form of the verb denotes past perfect tense. For example the root verb \(|\ddot{a}:\ddot{a}\mu:|\) (to go) when suffixed with \(|\ddot{e}j|\) denotes 'had gone' and it is a similar case with all verbs. However, nasalization does not occur at the initial position of a word. Though nasal phonemes are used in the initial position of a word like \(|\ddot{a}:\ddot{a}m\nu|\) (wife) or \(|\ddot{a}:\ddot{a}\ddot{a}m\nu|\) (grandson). The use of the phoneme \(|\ddot{a}|\) at the initial position is not possible, though it occurs at other possible. There are, however, no restrictions regarding the environments of other
phonemes, though some mutually exclusive phonemes like \( b \) and \( w \), \( fi \) and \( j \) are there.

Unlike most of the languages in the tribal belts of north-eastern India and Myanmar, Chakma is not a tonal language. That is to say the change of tone does not change the meanings of words. Besides intonation patterns like those of English where some words and syllables are stressed more than the others is not observable in Chakma. All the syllables in a word and all the words in a sentence get equal stress like most of the Indo-Aryan languages. However, intonational differences indicating changes of mood are very much a part and parcel of the language.

**MORPHOLOGICAL FEATURES**

It has repeated emphasized earlier that the language came in close contact with a number of different languages and words from those have either been adopted or assimilated. However one notices some peculiar features in the Chakma morphemic system.

Firstly, the system of nouns has some remarkable features which distinguish it from other languages in the region and most languages from the Indo-Aryan family. Most Indian languages do not have a system of distinguishing singular nouns from plural ones. The difference is mostly deduced from the context of use. In Chakma the suffixation of the bound morpheme 'um' or 'ani' makes the noun plural. Thus 'duar' (door) with addition of the morpheme 'ani' becomes 'duarani' (door) and 'peek' (bird) with the addition of 'um' becomes 'peekum' or birds. The two bound morphemes are not substitutable and are added in some specific phonological environments. There is a distinction between singulars and plurals even in the pronouns. All personal pronouns like 'I', 'we', 'you', 'he'. 'They' have Chakma equivalents. However, in the neuter gender there is no distinction between singulars and plurals as far as pronouns are concerned.

There is, however, no change in the pronoun with the change of gender. Thus 'ta' denotes both 'he' and 'she'. In the case of nouns there is no system of changing a noun
from masculine to feminine by suffixation or affixation of some morphemes. Normally separate words exist for separate genders. In case of animals to denote gender the word meaning male or female is sometimes affixed. For example, 'mala garu' (male cow) where 'mala' specifies the gender. The neuter gender is specified through the use of the pronoun \(\text{\textquoteleft j\textquoteright q\textquoteright n\textquoteright}\) (it).

In English the different cases of the noun are specified through the use of prepositions like 'by John' 'with John' etc. In Chakma the noun takes different forms in various cases. The noun takes some bound morphemes as suffix to indicate various cases. For example, suffixing 'ar' with the noun indicates belonging to. If 'Ram' is the noun 'Ramar' will indicate 'of Ram'. The suffixation of 'tum' would mean from the subject. Thus jhiya (daughter) suffixed with 'tum' would be 'jhiyatum' or from daughters 'Kay' suffixation indicates 'to' and the like. The suffixes do not change with the change in the number of the noun thus 'duarkay' and 'duaranikay' both indicate to door and to doors respectively.

The system of operation of nouns brings out the close similarity between Chakma, Kali and Sanskrit. Sanskrit distinguishes nouns on the basis of number and has a regular form for noun case endings. Sino-Tibetan languages and other languages in the region do not have such an elaborate and precise system of noun case endings. These systems inherent within the language perhaps indicate the fact that the language though operating in this region has an origin from the Indo-Aryan or Indo-European family of languages.

In the case of adjectives there is some distinction between the positive, comparative and superlative forms. However, the manner of changing a positive into comparative and superlative is not very regular. Perhaps the communicational needs of the language do not require a regular system for changing adjectives from one degree into another. The affixation of 'bhari' to an adjectives generally denotes comparative degree and affixation of 'beg' or 'bej' denotes a supelative degree. However, in some instances different words have also been used to denote the difference in degree. For example, the word 'algi'
(lazy) in the superlative form is not 'begaligi' but 'begunatun', though this holds good in a word like 'sweet' and 'sweetest' 'meeda' and 'bejmeeda' or 'dool' (pretty) 'bejdoob' (prettiest). The adjectives do not change with the change of the number and gender of the noun qualified and always occur before the noun.

The system of changing a noun into an adjective or vice-versa does not seem to exist in the language. When adjectives are to be used as a noun normally a new morpheme is used. However, adjectives in some cases are used as verbs by using the suffix 'gara'. For example, the adjective 'naran' (soft) changes to 'naran gara' (soften) or 'pagal' (mad) becomes 'pagalgara' (madden). This rule, however, does not work in the case of all adjectives. Some of these functions can be attributed to the fact that since the communicational needs are limited the system of changes from one category of morphemes into another has not established itself formally. In the course of time when the pressure of communication increases perhaps the system will also evolve systematic grammatical conventions.

There are a number of prepositions in the language though there is no system of articles. However, the exact use of prepositions is not like that of English, where it is used to define the object. The prepositions are sometimes used as verbs also. For example in a sentence like 'He is between us', the preposition 'sere' (between) is used as verb 'Te ama sere' (He us between). It is, however, difficult to compare the system of prepositions of Chakma and English. In English prepositions help to decide the case endings of nouns like 'of father' and 'to my daughter', and they occur as independent free morphemes. In Chakma the role of prepositions in deciding the noun case-endings is limited as the nouns take different forms in various cases. The role of prepositions is thus quite limited to that of communicating positions, relations and the like e.g. 'ugura' denoting on or up, 'tale' below and 'kai' near.

Adverbs are mostly compound words in Chakma 'jadhi-jadhi' (quickly) or 'lare-lare' (slowly). Most of them are made into adverbs by repeating the verbs to qualify their action or emphasising on the nature of the
action. Sometimes two verbs are also joined together to form an adverb. For example 'jadedepade' (definitely) is a combination of two verbs to emphasize the nature of action. However, the system of conversion of a morpheme from a verb or noun or adjective is quite rudimentary and perhaps no definite conventions exist. It is the nature of communication which decides the type of morpheme to be used in a particular sentence or situation. Codification of the rules regarding this aspect of language use is difficult to describe on the basis of available data.

SYNTACTIC STRUCTURE

It has been mentioned earlier that no formal grammar of the language exists except perhaps some rudimentary descriptions by Phayre (1841:712) and Talukdar (1994) and some broad hints in Grierson (1904). Most of data used and analysed has been taken from native speakers of the language, who were reasonably educated and fluent in their language. The syntactic structure of the language is essentially Subject + Object + Verb at the sentence level. Which seems to be very similar to most Indian languages. However, there are some instances of Sino- Tibetan languages where Object + Subject + Verb structure is used in the first person. In Chakma language the Order of a sentence is always S-O-V. The subject normally consists of a NP or a pronoun. Instances of complex sentences in the available folklore as recorded by Grierson (1904) are very rare. Most sentences appear to be simple sentences with a single subject and object and no relative clauses and such other devices to make the structure complex. Some instances of compound sentences are found where two simple sentences have been joined together with the help of a conjunction. It appears that the use of simple sentences is a stylistic feature of the language and perhaps comes about as a result of the socio-cultural needs of communication being comparatively simple and limited.

In imperative sentences sometimes the subject is omitted and the sentence consists of merely the Object and the Verb. For example, in a sentence like duar khul (door open) the subject is omitted. Such instances of omission of subject is observed even in some statements
relating to first person for example in a sentence like we have two sons the Chakma equivalent would be 'amaton divapua'. It is, however, difficult to say whether these are instances of collocation, or accepted grammatical for us.

Considering the fact that the Chakma language has no codified grammar and its use in modern times is mostly oral, the language appears to have an elaborate, precise and well developed system of verb. In fact the form of the verb can tell us all about the time and status of action. One need not look into the context of use and the Object to deduce the time and status of action. Besides the three tenses (which is present in all languages) there are quite a few aspects which the verb takes in each tense. Most developing languages have the infinitive, continuous aspects in the present and a past and future tense with no aspects. Chakma surprisingly has four aspects in the present, two in the past and one in the future. The change in the form of the verb to indicate its various tenses and aspects are very regular and formal and a definite pattern emerges about the forms taken by the verb in its various aspects. For example, | at the final position of the verb indicates 'ing' form of the verb in the first person singular.

What makes the system more complex and perhaps precise is the fact that the verb has a separate form for singulars and plurals and even changes its form with the change of the person. In all cases the verb is guided by the Subject and not the Object. For example, in a sentence I go home the Chakma equivalent would be 'Mui gharat jim' 'I to home go' and for 'we go home' it would be 'Ami gharat jir'. Obviously the verb has changed its form and if the pronoun were to be substituted by 'You', 'He' and 'They' the verb would take the following forms 'jeu' 'jai' and 'jan' respectively. The coordination of the verb is with the subject. However, the gender of the Subject does not change the form of the verb as happens in the case of Hindi.

In the perfect-continuous aspect of the present tense 'gari' as an auxiliary verb occurs before the main verb and the main verb takes 'e' as an affix. Otherwise
the main verb takes the form of the continuous aspect of the present tense. It must be noted, however, that this use is rather limited. The suffixation of 'bo' indicates past tense and for future sometimes the auxiliary 'thebo' is added before the main verb. Use of the verb twice is sometimes resorted to show emphasis on action, however, sometimes the adverb takes a similar position.

Negative sentences are formed by affixing 'na' to the main verb and to indicate future tense 'thebo' is affixed to the main verb. However, as mentioned earlier for present and past tense no such affixation is necessary. However, the presence of a noun or pronoun as subject indicating the number is essential in a sentence. The number is not deduced from context, though in some cases where verb forms are similar the time or tense is deduced from the subject. Interrogative sentences are formed by reversing the sentence with the morpheme 'ei', 'it', 'ta' and 'iba' indicating 'how', 'what', 'where' and 'whose' respectively. There does not appear to be any difference between 'yes/no' and 'wh' questions as far as the construction of the sentences are concerned.

The adjectives always precede the noun and adverbs precede the verbs as happens in most Indian languages. There are some instances of the use of double adjectives and double adverbs to emphasize a quality or the quality of action. Prepositions normally follow the nouns or adverbs in most sentences. Though the use of preposition is not so common as in the case of English.

The above discussion on the sentence structure of the language particularly those relating to the system of verbs brings out very clearly the similarities with Sanskrit, where the verbs take a different form with the change of tense aspect, person and number. It is quite clear from this that the language has its roots not in the environments where its speakers reside, but somewhere in the Indian hinterland.
The Chakma is written in a script which, allowing for its cursive form, is almost identical with the Khmer character, which was formerly in use in Cambodia, Laos, Annam, Siam, and, at least, the Southern parts of Mynamar. (Chakma 1992 and Grierson 1904). "The Khmer alphabet is, in its turn, the same as that which was current in the south of India in the sixth and seventh centuries." (Grierson 1904:323)
The Burmese alphabet is perhaps a more corrupted form of the Khmer alphabet, though it is derived from it. There are however, important differences between the Khmer system and that of Chakma, the inherent [ŋ] as a part and parcel of all consonant alphabets is a peculiarity of the Chakma system. The Chakma alphabet consists of 33 symbols including the vowel markers attached with consonants while forming words.

It must, however, be borne in mind that the demographic distribution of Chakmas has ensured that their original script is almost on the verge of getting forgotten as its use for printing books and for teaching-learning the language is almost non-existent. Chakmas in the Indian State of Tripura and the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh have adopted the Bengali script for teaching-learning the language upto the primary level and for creative writing. Those in Mizoram have adopted the Roman script and information regarding the adaptations made by the Chakmas in the Arakan region of Burma is not available. However, considering the policy of the government there it is quite likely that they have been forced to adopt the Burmese language.

The important question before the Chakmas today is the adoption of a single script and a decision regarding the standard form of the language. Plethora of scripts and dialects may be a sign for a living language, but, for a language still struggling for its survival too much of dialectic diversity can really result in the language getting lost. Socio-economic Compulsions point out the difficulties associated with reviving the original script, as many Chakmas desire. Perhaps a better idea could be the adoption of either the symbols of IPA or
the Devanagari Script as both can cater to the phonetic peculiarities associated with the language. It may be pointed out that the Bengali script has some inherent limitations which can distort the language in the long run.

The ancient literature in the language is mostly in the form of oral traditions, folklores and ballads. Some samples written in the original script survive to this day. However, in the present an emphatic attempt is being made to revive the literature of the language and experiments are being done with the literary forms to regenerate the language and its literature. Most of these creative works are being done in the language using the Bengali script. The Chakma Cultural Organization and other such organizations based in Tripura, West Bengal and Chittagong Hill Tracts are doing their utmost to revive the language.

CUNCLUSIONS AND LOOKING FORWARD

From the discussion in the body of the paper it is evident that it is not possible to classify the language as a dialect of Bengali or Burmese just on the basic lexical similarities or cultural affinities. The morphological structure and the syntactic structure show its closeness to Sanskrit and Pali though later changes came about the environmental factors. If the history of the Chakmas is to be believed that they hailed from the Sakya dynasty of northern Bihar the claim that theirs is a language seems to be more plausible. The similarities discussed earlier only reiterate this claim. It is certain that language do take in new words but the basic structure remains unchanged. The process of assimilation mutates words and phonological structures to adhere to its own system. So the more presence of words which are similar to another language cannot make the first language a dialect of the second.
The intonation pattern, structure of sentences, rules of operation etc are also important markers for classifying a language. It may be mentioned that the intonation pattern is similar to that of the Indo-Aryan languages and changes in tone do not change the meaning of words. What troubles the language today is lack of official patronage. Though Chakma District Council in the Mizoram State of India and some other organizations are making attempts to start primary education through Chakma language. Yet one feels that there is a need for adoption of an uniform script and recognizing one of the dialects as the standard language.
REFERENCES


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<tr>
<th>Chakma Alphabets</th>
<th>Chakma Pronunciation</th>
<th>English Form</th>
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| 1  
   2  
   3  
   4  | Talmua—A
   Ahabartulya—A
   A bannya—E
   A hanfei phudo dilya—EE | a
   e
   ee |
| 5  
   6  
   7  
   8  | Ektandy—U
   Deetandy—U
   Lejubho—E
   Deen banye—Al | u
   uu
   ea
   ea |
| 9  
   10 | Ekha din—dnel lya—O
   Dwadishdihel dily—OU | O
   ou (oo) |
| 11 | Ek Phudo llya—ANG | ou |
| 12 | Dwiphudo Jile—AH | a |
13  ৫

14  ৬

Dheli jya—

15  ২

Bachi—

16  ৩

Tandya—

17  ৩

Dwitandya—

18  ৬২

Ekardile—

19  ৩

Dnet Bangya—
